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The effects of homogeneous grouping practices on talented and gifted students

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review was to examine research findings about the effects of homogeneous grouping practices on gifted students. As school budgets have been cut, many gifted programs across the country have been impacted. Also, as tracking has become a political faux pas, many gifted programs have been eliminated.

The following are recommendations for education policy makers: realize that one teacher cannot do it all in a classroom with a wide range of abilities; know that content, in addition to grouping, is a main factor in students' advancement; remain flexible with grouping and programming; and try to overcome factors that are slowing or prohibiting change. Ideas for teachers include the following: experiment with homogeneous grouping in the classroom; build a program bit-by-bit; try gifted luncheons or study groups; offer a challenging and fast-paced curriculum; and use appropriate, flexible identification practices.

**THE EFFECTS OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING PRACTICES
ON TALENTED AND GIFTED STUDENTS**

A Graduate Literature Review

Submitted to the

Division of Middle Level Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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Submitted:

April 3, 2004

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review was to examine research findings about the effects of homogeneous grouping practices on gifted students. As school budgets have been cut, many gifted programs across the country have been impacted (Smutny, 1999; Westberg & Archambault, 1997; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). Also, as tracking has become a political faux pas, many gifted programs have been eliminated (Feldhusen, 1998; Robinson, 1990a; Tannenbaum, 1998). This literature review examined the following issues: historical and contemporary issues and concerns surrounding homogeneous grouping, homogeneous grouping and the learning, attitudinal, and social outcomes of talented and gifted learners, and what schools and teachers can do to provide an appropriate education for gifted and talented learners. Results of this literature review lead to the following conclusions: there are positive academic gains in favor of homogeneous grouping (Goldring, 1990; Hunt, 1996; Kerckhoff, 1986; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1982b, 1987; Rogers, 1998; Shields, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991), positive social outcomes are experienced by gifted students when placed in homogeneous groups (Rogers, 2002), and attitudes towards school (Goldring, 1990) and ability-grouped subjects (Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1984) improved in gifted students when they were grouped together. The following are recommendations for education policy makers: realize that one teacher cannot do it all in a classroom with a wide range of abilities; know that content, in addition to grouping, is a main factor in students' advancement; remain flexible with grouping and programming; and try to overcome factors that are slowing or prohibiting change. Ideas for teachers include the following: experiment with homogeneous grouping in the classroom; build a program bit-by-bit; try gifted luncheons or study groups; offer a challenging and fast-paced curriculum; and use appropriate, flexible identification practices.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who helped make this possible. Laura Guilford, my partner at the Monticello ICN site, made attending classes much more pleasurable. The cadre of students from across the state of Iowa was comprised of wonderful people; I enjoyed getting to know a wide variety of educators. Also, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Michael Sconsa, for his continued support. He inspires me to be a better educator. Thanks, also, to my advisor and my family for always caring.

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THE EFFECTS OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING PRACTICES ON TALENTED AND GIFTED STUDENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As school budgets have been cut, many gifted programs across the country have been impacted (Smutny, 1999; Westberg, Archambault, 1997; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). Also, as tracking has become a political faux pas, many gifted programs have been eliminated (Feldhusen, 1998; Robinson, 1990a; Tannenbaum, 1998). The purpose of this literature review was to examine research findings about homogeneous grouping practices for gifted students. With the limited resources of school districts, how can teachers still strive to best meet the needs of the gifted students in the classroom? Can the needs of gifted students be met in the heterogeneous classroom? What are the advantages of homogeneous instruction? Do the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones?

In today's educational climate of minimal funds and support for inclusion of all students in the regular education classroom, ability grouping is becoming less common (Feldhusen, 1998). "Today some still hold that it [ability grouping] is necessary for successful teaching, whereas others denounce it as an undemocratic practice with negative effects on children" (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, p. 22). Gallagher (1991) noted, "It has been accepted for some time that the United States has had a commitment to two values that may sometimes conflict with one another—*excellence* and *equity*" (p. 12). With such a variety of opinions present, research must be employed to address ability grouping and its effects on gifted students.

Rationale

My interest in ability grouping comes from my own educational experiences and my teaching experiences. As a gifted student, I was in several honors classes where I felt that I “belonged” and learned the most in those settings. As a teacher, I teach English to 8th grade students in a pulled-out gifted class, and I also teach English to 7th grade students in completely heterogeneous groups.

I see advantages to the pulled-out group such as the advanced curriculum and faster pace; I do see the negative side, such as haughty attitudes and the stigma attached to being gifted. I also feel extreme stress while trying to teach my 7th grade classes and meet everyone’s needs; I don’t feel that those gifted students get the same challenge that the pulled-out 8th graders get. The positive aspect of a heterogeneous group is the social interaction that occurs between different types of students.

These are the issues that led me to research homogeneous grouping practices. I was eager to read what the research had to say about the impact of homogeneous grouping practices on gifted students.

Purpose of Review Results

The results of my review of literature about homogeneous grouping practices and gifted students will be used to better inform my own teaching practices. As I have struggled to meet the needs of all of my students, my need for a greater understanding of this area was apparent. This review of literature will also be used to inform the decision-makers in my district about the best practices in gifted education. My school district will be undergoing an Iowa Department of Education visit in 2004. In the past, we have been found non-compliant in the area of gifted education, and we hope to improve our standing.

Importance of Review Results

There is a need for inquiry into the best practices for gifted students, both within my school district and within the country, as a whole. Feldhusen and Moon (1992) stated, “We are faced with incredible problems of underachievement among gifted youth in America” (p. 63). Agne (2001), Arnone

(1999), and Tannenbaum (1998) noted that underachievement, on the international scale, continued to be a problem. One of the factors contributing to this underachievement is the lack of challenge that gifted and talented youth receive in their classes (Reis & Westburg, 1994). There is evidence that textbooks have been “dumbed down” over the past few decades (Reis & Westburg, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1991). “Because of this change in the textbook industry, and because repetition is built into curricular approaches to reinforce learning, many gifted students spend much of their time in school practicing skills...they already know” (Reis & Westburg, 1994, p. 128).

Feldhusen and Moon (1992) found more evidence that American gifted youth are underachieving: Bright American students appear to be under-achieving when compared to students in other nations. For example, approximately 3% of American students take calculus; four to five times that number do so in other countries (Darling-Hammond, 1990). American gifted students also lag behind those in other countries in the sciences. Out of 13 countries, the most advanced U.S. 12th-graders ranked 9th in physics, 11th in chemistry, and 13th in biology (Darling-Hammond, 1990). In light of these statistics, we can only conclude that gifted high school students in America are not achieving their full potential. (p. 63)

As the education world struggles to meet the national requirements outlined in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), it is critical that each subgroup of the student population is given equal attention. “There are severe problems of underachievement among youth of high ability as reflected in standardized achievement test scores” (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992, p. 63). The No Child Left Behind legislation promises to remove oversights such as this in the education system. The talented and gifted students may seem easy to overlook at first, but it is those students who are most capable of achieving great things (Gosfield, 2002). Unless the performance of our top-achieving students

continues to rise, they will lose ground and schools will ultimately receive government sanctions as authorized in the NCLB legislation.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions that guided me as I began my research:

- What are the historical and contemporary issues and concerns surrounding homogeneous grouping?
- What does research on homogeneous grouping say about the learning, attitudinal, and social outcomes of talented and gifted learners?
- What can schools and teachers do to provide an appropriate education for gifted and talented learners?

Terminology

Many terms regarding the education of the gifted exist. Of primary concern is the definition of *gifted*; this is not to be confused with high achievers. As Slavin (1991) notes, “In most studies, high achievers are the top 33 percent of students; ‘gifted’ are more often the top 3-5 percent” (p. 68). Unless otherwise noted, for the purposes of this paper gifted will refer to that top 3-5 percent of students. The term *talented and gifted* will be used synonymously with the term gifted.

Other terms used in this paper refer to the way students are grouped for instruction. *Heterogeneous grouping*, sometimes termed mixed-skill grouping, means, “students are clustered for instruction without focusing on specific skill needs” (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 490). Using this type of instruction places students with a high-ability in the same group or context as those students that may need extra help. *Homogeneous grouping*, or same-skill grouping, occurs when “all students needing instruction on a particular skill are clustered for that instruction” (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 492). Students of similar perceived ability are placed together for instruction. Homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping can both take place within a classroom of mixed ability students. Students can also be grouped homogeneously by class, so that students of the same level are only with other students of that ability for that class.

Additional terms used in this paper relate to the curriculum and the way it is presented to the students. *Differentiation* of instruction can take many forms. Put simply, it “enhances learning for all students by engaging them in activities that better respond to their particular learning needs, strengths, and preferences” (Heacox, 2002, p. 1). With such a broad range of student needs in a classroom, strategies must be used to meet all students’ needs. Differentiation is “a collection of strategies that help you [teachers] better address and manage the variety of learning needs” presented by students (Heacox, 2002, p. 1). Tieso (1999) explained that, “Differentiation occurs when the teacher is able to see the need for change, variety, and new energy; when he or she is able to seize the ‘teachable moment’ and run with it” (Tieso, 1999, p. 41). Differentiation “puts students at the center of teaching and learning” and “lets their learning need direct...instructional planning” (Heacox, 2002, p. 1). There are many forms of differentiation, which can be used in a variety of ways to meet students’ needs. Examples include the following: providing flexibility with assignments, responding to individual interests, varying instruction, engaging each student, and using learner responsive lessons (Heacox, 2002).

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

It is obvious that ability grouping is a controversial issue; public scrutiny of the topic never seems to end (Armove, 1999). Even after experiencing both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping as a teacher and as a student, many questions still remained about the topic for me. I wondered about the benefits of homogeneous grouping, as I had enjoyed it both as a teacher and as a student. I also wanted to consider the drawbacks, because it still sparks controversy in my own district. A literature review was the best option for examining the research on the topic and drawing my own conclusions.

Method to Locate and Select Sources

The University of Northern Iowa's Rod Library was the main source for research of the topic of the effects of homogeneous grouping practices on gifted students. The online resources provided by the university were employed to search for articles. Online resource databases at UNI included Ovid's Silverplatter WebSPIRS and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Keyword searches included the following: grouping of talented and gifted, talented and gifted achievement, pull-out instruction for talented and gifted, heterogeneous grouping for talented and gifted, impact of homogeneous grouping for talented and gifted students, ability grouping, and classroom organization for gifted students. Once these articles were obtained, examination of the reference list of each article led to further resources on the subject.

Also, I utilized my school's gifted education library. This was important so that I could be aware of my school district's conception about gifted education practices. Many of the sources in this collection were used in the creation of our program. These sources were available to faculty, administration, and parents of talented and gifted children to use as resources.

Criteria to Include Literature

The literature that was used in the final review was the most relevant to the research topic. Those articles that directly addressed the research questions were given priority. Time constraints and access limited my search for additional resources.

Authors such as Kulik and Kulik, Rogers, and Renzulli, have been considered pivotal authors in gifted education, so publications by them were highly valued. Journals such as *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *Roeper Review*, and *Educational Leadership* are well-respected sources in education and gifted education and were considered credible sources of data.

Procedures to Analyze Sources

As articles were read, themes were noted. Articles were then categorized based on similar viewpoints on the research topic. Notes were taken while reading took place. Then, outlines were formed to facilitate the writing of the review. The most relevant sources were used in the final writing of the review.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Homogeneous grouping practices for talented and gifted students are very controversial (Arnone, 1999). Some find the practice to be undemocratic (George, 1993; Oakes, 1985), while others see it as the best way to ensure a proper education for the gifted (Kulik & Kulik, 1982b, 1984, 1992; Rogers, 1998, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). My teaching experience, as a teacher of both homogeneously and heterogeneously grouped talented and gifted students, and my experience as a gifted student led me to consider the positive and negative outcomes of the practice. My school district needs and the topic were also considered as the topic was narrowed to three research questions for the purpose of this literature review.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my inquiry:

- What are the historical and contemporary issues and concerns surrounding homogeneous grouping?
- What does research on homogeneous grouping say about the learning, attitudinal, and social outcomes of talented and gifted learners?
- What can schools and teachers do to provide an appropriate education for talented and gifted learners?

What are the Historical and Contemporary Issues and Concerns Surrounding Homogeneous Grouping?

It is clear that grouping, in any form, can lead to controversy. History and political climates have played a large role in educational philosophy (Kulik & Kulik, 1984). Educational priorities in the United States have ranged from equality to excellence, and somewhere in between (Gallagher, 1991). The use of

the rigid grouping practice, *tracking*, added to the negative sentiment about homogeneous grouping (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002). Also, research on both sides of the grouping battle has played a large role in how the issue is perceived.

Historical Perspective

When Russia launched Sputnik in 1957, the event created an urgent need in American education (Feldhusen, 1998; Kulik & Kulik, 1984). America had fallen behind in the space race and education had become the object of public scrutiny. Gifted students were viewed as an important resource for ensuring American educational success. Educators and administrators scrambled to improve talented and gifted education; however, that emphasis on gifted students has not been a mainstay in our educational framework (Arnone, 1999; Feldhusen, 1998).

In education, the pendulum swings often on issues (Arnone, 1999). "After the Sputnik era, many school systems turned their attention away from the gifted and toward the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minorities, and the handicapped. *Equality* replaced *excellence* as the watchword in American education" (Kulik & Kulik, 1984, p. 84). When the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) introduced *A Nation at Risk*, a report indicating American education was a factor in the country's fall from prominence in the world market, excellence in education resurfaced. Goldring (1990) reports that *A Nation at Risk* "stressed the need for American schools to provide appropriate opportunities for gifted and talented youth" (p. 313).

As education shifted toward equality in the late eighties and early nineties, *cooperative learning* and *inclusion* were the new education catchphrases (Brewer, Rees, & Argys, 1995; Feldhusen, 1998; Robinson, 1990b). The media and academic journals hailed cooperative learning as the new solution to most educational pitfalls (Robinson, 1990b). While cooperative learning was praised, ability grouping received negative criticism. Cooperative learning was "pitted against ability grouping" (Mills & Durden,

1992, p. 11). The trend towards cooperative learning was a trend away from ability grouping. For cooperative learning, it was recommended to use "...heterogeneous ability or achievement grouping strategies for the bulk of instructional time" (Robinson, 1990b, p. 11). In addition, "peer tutoring or partner learning" (Robinson, 1990b, p. 10) was a part of many cooperative learning plans. Gallagher (1991) explained that "in a heterogeneous class, bright students could be distributed into separate groups" and can "be 'helpers' for average or slow students" (p. 14).

In the twenty-first century, education has shifted in yet another direction. National standards and accountability now impact the practice of teachers and administrators. No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) is federal legislation shaping many education decisions and places importance on achievement for all subgroups of the student population, including the gifted. Over time it has been noted, "The drive for excellence...which is spurred on by our national concerns for society, bumps up against the feeling that it isn't fair to help those who already have so much [gifted students]" (Gallagher, 1991, p. 14). As the tide changes in education, as it inevitably does, looking at the body of research on the topic will provide insight into meeting the needs of talented and gifted students today.

Appropriate Grouping vs. Tracking

Grouping should not be confused with tracking. *Tracking* refers to homogeneous grouping across several curricular areas. Tracking is defined as "the segregation of students into groups defined by [perceived] ability levels" (Kerckhoff, 1986, p. 842). It is important to note the permanence of tracking, "Once students are in a certain track, there is very little movement between tracks during a school year or from one school year to another" (Fiedler et al., 2002, p. 108).

Grouping practices allow for much more flexibility. "Ability grouping does not imply permanently locking students out of settings that are appropriately challenging for them; it means placing them with others whose learning needs are similar to theirs for whatever length of time works best" (Fiedler

et al., 2002, p. 109). Grouping is never permanent; students are re-evaluated regularly to note progress in a subject (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). Feldhusen and Moon (1992) note that, with ability grouping, "Movement into and out of special groups is possible at almost any time as youth show new capabilities or fail to progress in each subject matter" (p. 65). Grouping matches students' needs with educational opportunities and is re-evaluated often to ensure it is still fulfilling those needs.

Over time, the two terms, tracking and grouping, have been used synonymously. "In common parlance the terms *tracking* and *grouping* are often used interchangeably. Indeed, much of the current criticism of ability grouping equates grouping and tracking" (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992, p. 64). Historically, tracking has been a "locked in/locked out" (George, 1993, p. 18) situation. Group placement was permanent and placement was based on minimal data (George, 1993). This resulted in racial and ethnic bias in gifted programs, with few racial minorities or economically disadvantaged students represented in gifted programs (Fiedler et al., 2002). Students were placed in ability groups in elementary school and never moved; this caused low groups to fall exponentially behind (George, 1993). "Tracking can also result in students of different levels receiving very different curricula and can deny lower-ability students access to enriched programs and college-bound courses" (Jones & Gerig, 1994, p. 27). It is obvious why tracking and grouping have had such strong responses. Tracking used minimal data and was too rigid; grouping, with its more flexible and fair approach, deserves a more positive response.

As the trend moved from tracking to grouping, educational practice improved. Fiedler et al. (2002) noted, "Wide-spread efforts are being made to overcome the inequities of over-reliance on standardized test score data and assumptions that too often have been made about students who, although gifted, may not fit the stereotype of high achievers with positive attitudes towards school" (p. 110). Also, "federal allocation of money for gifted has targeted the identification and programming of underrepresented groups" (VanTassel-Baska, 1992, p. 70). Renzulli and Reis (1991) promoted grouping "that takes into consideration

factors in addition to ability, and sometimes in place of ability. These factors might include motivation, specific interests, complementary skills, [and] career aspiration" (p. 31). Feldhusen (1998) recommends the use of "tests, rating scales, auditions and classroom observations by teachers" to place gifted students into appropriate programming (Feldhusen, 1998, p. 736). Jones and Gerig (1994) found that the negative effects of tracking were removed from their study when "Students were ability-grouped for only two of the six classes...each day. This reduced the negative effects of labeling, as well as the effects of any low expectations held by...teachers or peers" (p. 33). Fortunately, grouping practices are improving. Grouping is being based on more data and is becoming less rigid (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Fiedler et al., 2002). The two terms, tracking and grouping, can no longer be viewed as similar.

Opposing Research and Arguments

Gallagher (1991) noted of gifted students that "This is the only category of exceptional children for whom we [Americans] seriously question whether we should provide special services" (p. 14). Agne (2001) also states that, "They [gifted students] are as far from the mean as are students with profound learning disabilities" (Agne, 2001, p. 168). It should not be surprising that the public is divided over the issue. While there are many researchers who have found positive outcomes when homogeneous grouping of the gifted was used (see next section), others also argued against the practice.

Inequity. One viewpoint on grouping maintained that students should be taught in a single classroom, not separated out for instruction. "Researchers such as Slavin (1992) and Oakes (1985) represent the position that the needs of all children are best served within a single, heterogeneous class using a variety of approaches to teaching and learning" (Shields, 2002, p. 115). Westberg et al. (1993) disagreed with the thought that one teacher can do all things; in their study of forty-six classrooms, they found little to no differentiation in the regular classroom for gifted students. They summarized their findings:

Even if classroom teachers are provided with awareness, strategies, and permission and encouragement to make new provisions for gifted learners in their regular classroom, the reality of teaching in regular classrooms today is that many teachers are frequently overburdened with a large number of students who have special needs or with exceptionally large class sizes.

Therefore, other accommodations, such as cluster grouping for subjects or resource programs, should be provided to enable classroom teachers to meet the needs of bright students. (Westberg et al., 1993, pp. 142-143)

Shields (2002) in a study comparing a school using homogeneous grouping to a school with heterogeneous grouping also concurred with Westberg et al. (1993), "The existing research clearly shows that some form of homogeneous grouping benefits the most able and gifted students" (Shields, 2002, p. 238). The case that gifted students' needs are met in the regular classroom is not supported by current research.

Self esteem. Another criticism of homogeneous grouping for the gifted is that students' self-esteem is negatively impacted by the practice. George (1993) in his argument against ability grouping contended, "The evidence seems to indicate that high *track* (italics added) students have considerably higher...personal self concepts. Students in low track classes are not so much critical of school as they are of their own abilities (Oakes, 1985)" (p. 19). As noted earlier, tracking and ability grouping are very different in organization and cannot be used synonymously, so this would not be a valid argument against ability grouping. Kulik and Kulik (1992) found that "ability grouping does not have devastating effects on student self-esteem as Oakes (1985) has charged. Effects of grouping on self-esteem are near zero overall" (p. 76). Kulik and Kulik (1992) also found that homogeneous grouping can have positive effects on slower learners because they are surrounded by role models with whom they can identify. So, those who oppose grouping per se may actually just be opposed to rigid grouping, such as tracking.

Social change. Some argue against homogeneous grouping as a means of social change. "Oakes (1985), a leader in the attack, has charged that ability grouping is discriminatory, unfair, and ineffective" (Kulik & Kulik, 1992, p. 73). Rogers (1998) found that "nothing in more recent research has supported Oakes' (1985) contentions that 'higher quality' instructors are placed in high-track classrooms" (p. 41). Feldhusen and Moon (1992) found Oakes' viewpoint to be misplaced; they said Oakes' argument is a call for "social change," not educational reform (p. 64). Fiedler et al. (2002) concurred that for many years placement into talented and gifted programs was based solely on test scores, which were biased. They noted that newer placement procedures rely on more data sources than standardized test scores (Fiedler et al., 2002). Overall, Kulik and Kulik (1992) summed it up:

Whereas Oakes concludes that grouping programs are unnecessary, ineffective, and unfair, we conclude that the opposite is true. We believe that American schools would be harmed by the elimination of programs that tailor instruction to the aptitude, achievement, and interests of groups with special needs. (p. 76)

Current research findings do not support Oakes' (1985) beliefs; they show that any unfairness or bias previously a part of gifted programs has been or is being overcome.

The gifted as peer models. One additional argument against homogeneous grouping of gifted students is that those gifted students are needed in the regular classroom to serve as models (Agne 2001; Allan, 1991; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). Agne (2001) noted that "when able students reveal their advanced levels of knowledge and creativity, they are often forced to instruct the slower students" (Agne, 2001, p. 169). Allan (1991) finds fault with this belief, "It is morally questionable for adults to view any student's primary function as that of a role model to others" (p. 64). Schunk (1987) found that peer modeling is contingent on "perceived similarity between model and observer" (p. 149). Therefore, this argument is not relevant because homogeneous grouping keeps students of similar ability together and does not remove

peer role models. As George (1993) states, “no group, no individual students, should be expected to sacrifice an excellent education so that others might do better” (p. 23). The thought that gifted students are needed to be positive role models in the classroom is not a valid argument against homogeneous grouping.

What does Research on Homogeneous Grouping Say about the Learning, Attitudinal, and Social Outcomes of Talented and Gifted Learners?

Despite the numerous arguments against ability-grouping, many positive effects of grouping have been found. Academic gains have been reported from the use of homogeneous grouping (Goldring, 1990; Hunt, 1996; Kerckhoff, 1986; Kulik, 1991; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1987, 1992; Mills & Durden, 1992; Rogers, 1998; Shields, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Vaughn, Feldhusen, and Asher, 1991). In addition, positive social (Agne, 2001; Feldhusen, 1989; Feldhusen & Kennedy, 1989; Rogers, 1998; Shields, 2002; Sicola, 1990; Swiatek, 1998) and attitudinal outcomes are achieved using ability grouping (Callahan, 2001; Feldhusen, 1998; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Goldring, 1990; Jones & Gerig, 1994; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1984; Sicola, 1990).

Academic Gains

What academic gains do gifted students experience when grouped with other students who are equally as gifted? It has historically been difficult to report academic gains of gifted students on achievement tests because so many gifted students reached the ceilings of the tests (Kerckhoff, 1986; Kulik, 1991). Kulik (1991) noted “almost all studies use standardized tests as criterion measures of achievement” (p. 67). He goes on to say that the effect size is smaller using these tests than it would be using local tests as measures of achievement (Kulik, 1991) because the ceiling effect does not properly measure gifted students’ achievement. Despite these ceiling effects reducing the benefits shown in research data, achievement gains were still found when gifted students were grouped together.

Several researchers doing studies of homogeneously grouped gifted students as compared with heterogeneously grouped gifted, those gifted students placed in the classroom with nongifted peers, have found positive effects in academic achievement when homogeneous grouping was employed. Kerckhoff (1986) studied a large sample of both homogeneously and heterogeneously grouped secondary schools in Britain. He found that, "Those in ability groups increase their average performance level beyond that exhibited by comparable students in ungrouped [heterogeneously grouped] school settings" (Kerckhoff, 1986, p. 856). Hunt (1996), using a pretest and post-test design, studied the achievement of heterogeneously grouped gifted sixth grade math students as compared to that of their homogeneously grouped counterparts. The largest growth between the pretest and post-test occurred for the gifted students that were homogeneously grouped. The top five percent of the students in a homogeneous class had statistically significant higher scores than their peers in a heterogeneous setting (Hunt, 1996). Shields (2002) compared two Canadian schools with a standardized curriculum; one grouped students homogeneously while the other used heterogeneous grouping. The high-level pulled-out group scored higher on the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills than those heterogeneously grouped.

Meta-analyses have been conducted on studies reporting the effects of ability grouping; the meta-analyses have consistently shown that ability grouping has positive effects on the academic achievement of gifted youth. Vaughn et al. (1991) reviewed nine research studies involving pull-out programs for the gifted. They found statistically significant increases in achievement level, critical thinking, and creativity in those gifted students. VanTassel-Baska (1992) in a review of studies concluded that, "The achievement of gifted students at both elementary and secondary levels is enhanced by a variety of forms of ability grouping (Slavin, 1987)" (p. 70). Rogers (1998), in a meta-evaluation of thirteen meta-analyses on grouping, concluded that,

High-ability and gifted students tend to benefit most from like-ability grouping because the strategy provides them with the opportunity to access more advanced knowledge and skills and to practice deeper processing. Most likely, this access can be provided when instructors are not forced to divide their teaching energies and efforts among widely diverse levels of ability and achievement. (p. 42)

Goldring (1990) in a meta-analysis of twenty-three studies on ability grouping found “gifted students in special, homogeneous classrooms perform better than their gifted counterparts in regular, integrated classrooms” (p. 323).

Kulik and Kulik, noted researchers in the field of ability grouping, have completed numerous meta-analyses (1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1987, 1992) on the topic of ability grouping and repeatedly found it to improve the academic achievement of gifted students. They have noted,

The strongest and clearest effects of grouping were in the programs designed especially for talented students. The talented students in these programs gained more academically than they would have if they had been taught in heterogeneous classes....Separating talented students into homogeneous groups apparently enabled teachers to provide learning opportunities for the students that were unavailable in more heterogeneous groups. (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, p. 28)

In their 1992 meta-analysis, Kulik and Kulik found that “academic benefits are clearest for those in high ability groups” (p. 76). Ability grouped students “benefited from the stimulation provided by other high-aptitude students and from the special curricula that grouping made possible” (Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, p. 425). In over a decade of research, Kulik and Kulik continually found support for ability grouping and its positive impact on student achievement.

Ability grouping has been shown to lead to positive academic outcomes among the gifted. Even though the gains are most prominent for gifted students (Kulik & Kulik, 1992), it is important to note that

this type of grouping has also been shown to have no negative effects on groups other than the gifted (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, 1992; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). In other analyses, ability grouping was found to be a positive practice for students of all abilities (Allan, 1991; Rogers, 1998).

The evidence consistently shows that gifted students benefit from ability grouping. Mills and Durden (1992) noted, "When grouping is done in such a way that heterogeneity is truly reduced and instruction is indeed changed to accommodate student needs, the research shows achievement gains (Kulik & Kulik, 1984, 1990; Slavin, 1987)" (p. 13). Different forms of grouping influence effect size (Kulik & Kulik, 1987) but, overall, grouping practices positively affect the achievement of gifted students. Feldhusen and Moon (1992) also added, "The achievement of gifted and highly able students suffers when grouping methods are abandoned (Gamoran, 1987, 1990; Gamoran & Berends, 1987)" (p. 66). The research evidence clearly favors ability grouping and shows no reasons for abandoning the practice.

Social Outcomes

Research has shown academic achievement is positively impacted when gifted students are homogeneously grouped. However, school is meant to develop more than the mind. What are the social outcomes of placing gifted students together for instruction?

Many argue that heterogeneous grouping creates negative feelings for many students in the class. Gifted and talented youth can feel out-of-place in the regular classroom (Swiatek, 1998). Feldhusen (1989) reported that often gifted students must pretend to be something they are not. He explained, "Gifted children must often hide or suppress their special interests or enthusiasms for academic topics or face ridicule; peer pressure prohibits excitement about academics in many schools" (Feldhusen, 1989, p. 9). In contrast, in homogeneous classes for gifted students, "mutual reinforcement of enthusiasm for academic interests and activities prevails" (Feldhusen, 1989, p. 9). Sicola (1990) concurred, "Not wanting to experience the accusation of elitism and not wanting to suffer boredom, the gifted youth...has an especially

difficult task of locating his or her niche in the school community" (p. 40). In addition, gifted students desire excelling but don't want to do it alone (Sicola, 1990; Swiatek, 1998). This separation from students with similar abilities "leads to feelings of isolation, social frustration, poor social skills, and discrimination by age mates" (Sicola, 1990, pp. 40-41).

The gifted student can feel alone in the heterogeneous classroom, but others can experience negative social outcomes when a wide variety of abilities are present in the classroom. Feldhusen and Kennedy (1989) found that "gifted and talented often dominate the regular classroom discussion and that...was often discouraging to less able youth when they were together in the regular classroom" (p. 155). Fiedler et al. (2002) commented that when gifted students dominate in the regular classroom, other learners' "perceptions as competent, capable learners suffer" (p. 111). Agne (2001) also commented on the embarrassment that regular education students can feel in a heterogeneous classroom with talented and gifted students present. Gifted students are not only out-of place in the regular classroom; their presence there can make others uncomfortable.

Are these uncomfortable feelings gone when homogeneous grouping is used? Shields (2002) noted, "Present findings indicate that...the practice of homogeneous grouping for academically talented and gifted students is not detrimental to the...social growth of the students" (Shields, 2002, p. 119). Swiatek (1998) stated that, "ability grouping has the benefit of providing gifted students with a full-day 'support group' as well as an appropriate group of students with whom to learn and socialize" (Swiatek, 1998, p. 44). Rogers (2002) noted that,

What seems evident about the spotty research on socialization and psychological effects when grouping by ability is that no pattern of improvement or decline can be established. It is likely that there are many personal, environmental, family, and other extraneous variables that affect self-esteem and socialization more directly than the practice of grouping itself. (p. 107)

In her earlier research, Rogers (1998) also found that, "Both high-ability and low-ability students benefit from more social interactions when grouped within class with like-ability peers (Berge, 1990; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Hacker & Rowe, 1993; Chauvet & Blatchford, 1993; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Exception: Jones & Gerig, 1994)" (p. 41). While the heterogeneous classroom seems to create some negative social outcomes, the homogeneous classroom may remove some of the negativism and does not cause the gifted students any additional social problems beyond that of a typical student.

Attitudinal Outcomes

Gifted students spend much of the school day in the regular classroom learning information they already know or moving at a pace that is too slow for them (Callahan, 2001; Feldhusen, 1989). How do these circumstances impact the attitude of gifted youth towards school? Gifted students often feel isolated and unable to show their enthusiasm for learning in a regular classroom (Sicola, 1990). This probably explains the reason that Jones and Gerig (1994) found more students responding during classroom discussion in homogeneous groups than in the heterogeneous classroom.

In the heterogeneous classroom, lack of challenge can hurt students' attitudes towards school. Feldhusen and Moon (1992) noted, "Motivation suffers when new learning tasks are too easy or too difficult" (p. 63). Feldhusen (1989) also added that too many circumstances of not being adequately challenged "demotivates the gifted and talented, and is at the heart of the widespread problem of underachievement among the gifted" (p. 8). Callahan (2001) stated that, "Students may not be increasing their knowledge, understanding, or skill if they come to the classroom with a level of performance that exceeds what the grade-level curriculum requires" (Callahan, 2001, p. 43). Kulik and Kulik (1982a, 1984) found that students in ability-grouped classes had better attitudes towards the subject they were grouped for, as compared with their non-grouped classes. Goldring (1990) found student attitude toward school was positively impacted when students were grouped by ability for instruction.

Summary

The United States has been riddled with intense controversy over homogeneous grouping practices (Arno, 1999). Historical events (Kulik & Kulik, 1984), rigid tracking practices (Fiedler et al., 2002), and research against grouping programs (Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1991) have fueled the fire against homogeneous grouping. Despite all of the negative sentiment, homogeneous grouping has been shown to produce many positive effects. Academic gains have been shown when gifted students are homogeneously grouped (Goldring, 1990; Hunt, 1996; Kerckhoff, 1986; Kulik, 1991; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1987, 1992; Mills & Durden, 1992; Rogers, 1998; Shields, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Vaughn et al., 1991). Also, positive social effects come about from same-skill grouping (Agne, 2001; Feldhusen, 1989; Feldhusen & Kennedy, 1989; Rogers, 1998; Shields, 2002; Sicola, 1990; Swiatek, 1998). Positive attitudinal outcomes are also brought forth in gifted students when they are grouped with like-ability peers (Callahan, 2001; Feldhusen, 1998; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Goldring, 1990; Jones & Gerig, 1994; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1984; Sicola, 1990). The positive aspects of homogeneous grouping for gifted students should not continue to be overlooked. As Tannenbaum (1998) reminded us, "Nobody can ever know how many budding, brilliant minds, which might have made a difference in improving the quality and health of life on this planet, have withered on the vine for lack of attention to their unique needs" (p. 19).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After teaching and learning, both in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, I began to wonder about the effects of grouping on gifted students. I narrowed the topic to homogeneous grouping because that is the grouping style I have enjoyed most, in both of my educational roles. I set out to find the effects of this form of grouping on gifted students. A literature review was the most appropriate means for me to gain more knowledge about this issue. After reading historical and current research findings, I organized my findings into themes and set out to synthesize the findings.

This literature review will be useful to me, personally, as a classroom teacher. Sound practice is supported by quality research, and now I feel that I have a strong foundation concerning grouping and students who are gifted. The results will also be used to inform my school district's decision-makers about the best grouping practices for gifted students. As my district strives to best meet the needs of all students, meet the qualifications outlined in No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and be found compliant in all areas during our Iowa Department of Education visit, these review results will be useful.

Several issues and concerns about homogeneous grouping have hindered the practice over time. Throughout history, political climates have shaped educational thought on grouping practices (Gallagher, 1991; Kulik & Kulik, 1984). Equity and excellence, often conflicting values, have shaped education policy at different times (Arnone, 1999; Gallagher, 1991; Tannenbaum, 1998). Another factor influencing grouping practices has been the negative press surrounding tracking. Tracking, a rigid grouping practice, was based on little data (George, 1993), was biased (Fiedler et al., 2002), and promoted unequal education (Jones & Gerig, 1994). These detrimental aspects of tracking led to negative sentiment about ability grouping. Current grouping practices are eliminating many of the negative facets that were included in

tracking (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Fiedler et al., 2002) and the two terms cannot be used synonymously.

Research opposing ability grouping has also influenced decision-makers in school districts. Some have argued that students are best taught in a heterogeneous classroom (Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1991). Others believe that students' self-esteem is hurt by homogeneous grouping practices (George, 1993), education is a means to social change (Oakes, 1985), or that talented and gifted students are needed in the regular classroom to serve as role models (Allan, 1991; VanTassel-Baska, 1992). All of these arguments against homogeneous grouping have been refuted by research in this area (Allan, 1991; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992; Fiedler et al., 2002; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Shields, 2002; Westberg et al., 1993).

Conclusions

There is no definitive answer in education; each district and school must consider its unique community, staff, and student body when making educational decisions. However, current research has shown positive learning, attitudinal, and social outcomes for talented and gifted students when homogeneous grouping is used for gifted learners. This grouping practice should be considered best to meet the needs of this special population of students.

The academic benefits of homogeneous grouping for gifted students have been shown by several studies. Hunt (1996), Kerckhoff (1986), and Shields (2002) all conducted studies comparing like-ability students to heterogeneously grouped students; they all found positive academic gains in favor of homogeneous grouping. Several meta-analyses have also concluded that academic scores were increase for gifted students when homogeneous grouping was used (Goldring, 1990; Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1982b, 1987; Rogers, 1998; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Vaughn, et al., 1991). It has been reported that achievement levels improved (Vaughn, et al., 1991) because students are surrounded by more students with advanced abilities (Rogers, 1998). Gifted peers provided "stimulation" (Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, p. 425) for their high-level peers and were also allowed to "access more advanced knowledge" (Rogers, 1998, p. 42) in

homogeneous groups. Also important to note, no negative effects were found for other students when gifted students were homogeneously grouped (Kulik & Kulik, 1987, 1992; VanTassel-Baska, 1992).

Gifted students have also been found to experience positive social outcomes when placed in homogeneous groups. Historically, it has been found that the regular education classroom can be a difficult place for talented youth to spend their days (Sicola, 1990). Many times these gifted students feel the need to hide their abilities to escape chastisement from age-mates (Feldhusen, 1989). In addition, regular education students can grow to resent the presence of students so much more talented than themselves (Fiedler et al., 2002). Rogers (2002) found that all students experience positive outcomes when grouped with students of similar academic abilities with opportunities to advance and a challenging curriculum.

When gifted students are constantly encountering information they already know or receiving new information at a slow pace (Adams, 2003; Feldhusen, 1989; Winebrenner, 2000), their attitudes in the regular classroom can suffer (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). Jones and Gerig (1994) reported that gifted students participated more in homogeneous classroom than in heterogeneous ones. Attitudes towards school (Goldring, 1990) and ability-grouped subjects (Kulik & Kulik, 1982a, 1984) improved in gifted students when they were grouped together.

All students have rights in the educational process. Gifted students should have the right to a challenging and informative education. Academic achievement, attitudes, and social lives have all been shown to be positively impacted when gifted students are homogeneously grouped.

Recommendations

Much research about the best practices for talented and gifted students exists. School districts and teachers should continue to stay up-to-date on research recommendations.

What can schools and teachers do to provide an appropriate education for gifted and talented learners?

There are several options for providing gifted and talented learners an appropriate education. The worst thing that could be done is nothing.

Educational Policies

- Realize that one teacher cannot do it all in a classroom with a wide range of abilities.
- Know that content, in addition to grouping, is a main factor in student advancement.
- Remain flexible with grouping and programming.
- Try to overcome factors that slow or prohibit change.

It was pleasant to find several of our district practices are backed up by the research. We provide a variety of grouped and non-grouped classes at the middle school and thus alleviate the *tracking* scenario. Our gifted students are homogeneously grouped for some classes and not for others; also, they are grouped only according to their giftedness in that subject, not giftedness overall. We also have a nomination committee that considers several factors when placing students into the talented and gifted program. Teacher and parent recommendations, Cognitive Abilities Test [CAT] scores, and Iowa Tests of Basic Skills [ITBS] results are just some of the factors considered. This fits with Renzulli and Reis's (1991) idea of considering many factors when identifying students for a gifted program. Additionally, student names are not revealed during nominations; it is an anonymous system. Another positive aspect in our district is the communication between teachers, talented and gifted staff, parents, and students regarding talented and gifted placement. It is an ongoing process and placement in the gifted program is never permanent.

One teacher can't do it all. School districts need to realize is that one teacher cannot do it all in a diverse heterogeneous classroom. Regular classroom teachers already face extreme demands without adding the pressure of differentiating for gifted students (McDaniel, 2002). Sicola (1990) noted:

A philosophy that insists on strict heterogeneous grouping and calls on teachers to meet individual needs in classrooms of 25 or more students spanning a half dozen grade levels in ability is not only unrealistic but also promotes inflexibility in terms of meeting gifted students' needs. (p. 46)

Research (Mulhem, 2003; Reis & Westberg, 1994; Westberg & Archambault, 1997; Westberg, et al., 1993) has shown that minimal modifications are made for gifted students in such heterogeneous classrooms. One answer, then, is to decrease the heterogeneity of the classroom (Mills & Durden, 1992). Other options that have been noted are to reduce class sizes or hire classroom aides to reduce the demands on the teacher (Evertson, Sanford, & Emmer, 1981). The wide range of abilities that classroom teachers must attend to is astonishing (Adams, 2003; Winebrenner, 2000). Gifted students may finally receive the education they deserve "when instructors are not forced to divide their teaching energies and efforts among widely diverse levels of ability and achievement" (Rogers, 1998, p. 41).

Grouping is only one piece of the puzzle. It's important to realize that grouping in and of itself will not solve the educational trials of the gifted. "Grouping of the gifted should be viewed as a fundamental approach to serving them appropriately rather than merely as an organizational arrangement" (VanTassel-Baska, 1992, p. 71). Kulik and Kulik (1992) note that a "key factor is the degree to which course content is adjusted to group ability in the programs" (p. 76). Without the adjustment of course material, grouping does not make as strong of an impact as it can.

VanTassel-Baska (2000) also noted the importance of curriculum in a gifted program. Goldring (1990) added "program aspects, such as selection criteria, teaching methods and materials, and teacher training, influence the effectiveness of gifted education programs" (p. 324). Simply placing gifted students together with no other modifications does not take advantage of the opportunities for faster pace and more in-depth instruction. Once gifted students are ability-grouped, teachers should adjust their pace and material to best meet their students' needs (Slavin, 1987). Mills and Durden (1992) remind us that once students are

grouped by ability, “it is the appropriateness of the content and instruction that accompanies the grouping that determines the educational outcomes for students” (p. 14). Teachers need to increase pace, use more in-depth teaching, and utilize students’ higher order thinking skills once they are ability-grouped in order to maximize grouping benefits (VanTassel-Baska, 2000). These are good practices for all students, not just those that are ability grouped. If districts have curriculum directors or specialists in gifted education, special attention should be given to gifted education’s curricular content.

Flexibility. Flexibility is a key ingredient when considering talented and gifted programming.

What works best for one gifted student may not be the best answer for another (Sicola, 1990). Sicola (1990) notes, “Flexibility in grouping and placement practices as well as in the development of academic programs for gifted students results in meeting the needs of this population” (p. 46). Also, placement in groups should be very flexible and “allow for easy reassignments after initial placement” (Slavin, 1987, p. 328). Grouping should involve many different groups at different times; seminars, small groups, and large group discussion can all be utilized at different times (VanTassel-Baska, 1992, 2000). Schools should not lock-in groups or choose only one grouping method; flexibility is key to meeting all students’ needs.

Outside factors. Factors such as “organization of the school, finances, lack of time, coworkers, and administrative support” can inhibit change in programming for talented and gifted students (Johnsen, Haensly, Ryser, & Ford, 2002). Aspects that positively impact programming for gifted students include teachers’ training and knowledge, teachers’ willingness to change, collaboration, teachers’ beliefs and strategies for differentiation, leadership, and support (Westberg & Archambault, 1997). Teacher training is a key aspect in meeting gifted students’ needs; students whose teachers had extra training in meeting the needs of gifted students achieved more (Goldring, 1990). Gosfield (2002) noted that, “ Since most gifted students spend the majority of their time in regular classes, regular teachers must be professionally trained to meet the needs of gifted students in those regular classes...it is time we recognize that every teacher is a

teacher of the gifted” (Gosfield, 2002, p. 16). Kennedy (2002) noted that, “The time is at hand to intensify efforts to familiarize classroom teachers with the needs of the gifted” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 124).

Beyond inservice training. Staff development in gifted education helps meet students’ needs (Westberg et al., 1993), but in-service training alone is not enough (Reis & Westberg, 1994). School districts should not be under the impression that a single day of teacher in-service will cure their gifted education program issues. VanTassel-Baska (2000) noted that school districts needed to work with a group of teachers for at least two years to see real change in differentiation practices. Continued and repeated education, as well as in-depth instruction that directly relates to the school and the staff are needed (Reis & Westberg, 1994). Other ideas to make training relevant are to consider educators’ personalities, philosophies, and students and then tailor the program to meet specific district and teacher needs (Reis & Westberg, 1994).

Teacher Practices

The following are recommendations to help classroom teachers tailor their classrooms to best meet the needs of gifted students:

- Experiment with homogeneous grouping in the classroom
- Build a program bit-by-bit; try gifted luncheons, study groups, or low-cost alternatives
- Offer a challenging and fast-paced curriculum
- Use appropriate, flexible identification practices

Low-cost alternatives. Financial woes are causing gifted education programs to be cut across the country (Westberg et al., 1993). It may be unrealistic to request new teachers for pullout programs or additional training about gifted education when school districts face deficits. There are low-cost alternatives: use of homogeneous grouping on a small scale within the classroom, organize committees to research and discuss current issues and trends in gifted education, form “gifted support groups” during

lunch so that gifted students have a chance to socialize with like peers, or use independent projects to keep gifted students motivated. Many things that can be done to help gifted students without spending a lot of money. If funds are low, start small and try to build the program bit-by-bit each year.

Keep what works; change what doesn't. I will continue to offer a challenging and fast-paced curriculum to the homogeneously grouped eighth grade students. Some changes will occur in the heterogeneously grouped seventh grade class, however. Students will be grouped homogeneously within the heterogeneous classes more often. Also, more independent and advanced options will be offered for gifted students and other students in the class looking for a challenge. My school's selection committee is also considering ways to include more students in gifted programming and to re-evaluate those already in the program; this is intended to increase flexibility. In the meantime, I will continue pushing for the creation of a seventh grade homogeneously grouped English class.

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson once said, "nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people" (Fiedler et al., 2002, p. 108). Let us not continue treating each of our students as equals; gifted students deserve classroom differentiation and at least some form of homogeneous grouping. Our most talented students deserve our best educational practices. Tannenbaum (1998) reminded us, "If nothing special is done for the gifted, nothing special happens," (Tannenbaum, 1998, p. 12). Feldhusen and Moon (1992) summed it up well:

Appropriate grouping, acceleration of instruction to the students' level of readiness, teachers who can create truly challenging classroom instructional activities and help students rise to the challenges, and association with peers of equal ability in a warmly supportive educational climate free of negative peer pressures—these are the ingredients of excellent instruction for our most able students. (p. 66)

Gosfield (2002) reminds us that, "This special needs group of learners [the gifted] have much potential both in terms of their possible personal accomplishment, but also in the potential contributions they may make to society through future problem solving and leadership" (Gosfield, 2002, p. 18). Political rhetoric, social faux pas, and insufficient opposing arguments should not stop the practice of homogeneous grouping. Our most gifted students, like all students, deserve to have their educational needs met.

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